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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women: emerging issues, trends and new approaches to issues affecting the situation of women or equality between women and men

Statement submitted by the International Federation on Ageing, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 26 July 1996.

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"Women's rights are human rights" is more than a catchy slogan. It reaffirms that the human rights of women throughout the life cycle are an inalienable and indivisible part of universal human rights. However, in documents, conventions, and action plans, the special needs and contributions of older women remain primarily invisible. This, despite the fact that in practically all countries, women account for the majority of the older population, and the proportion of women to men increases with age, with the oldest old predominately women.

Perhaps it is assumed that if the human rights of the girl-child are secured, the lives of the future older woman will then be more secure. Or, perhaps if women's reproductive rights and their right to development are advanced, then the future for older women will be brighter, they will be healthier and have greater economic security. Indeed, this forward-looking approach may in time help to eliminate discrimination on the basis of both sex and age. But statistics suggest that much more action needs to be taken, and quickly, to address the current and urgent issues.

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On the global level now, women make up over half of the 60-to-70 age group. They make up 65 per cent of the oldest old, the cohort of those aged over 80. That is the fastest growing segment of most populations. By 2025 nearly a quarter of all older women will be in this age group. They are a smaller proportion of the older women in developing countries, but there, too, they are growing at a much faster rate and will more than triple in number by 2025. The growth of the oldest old has important implications for social planning, since they are more likely to be in poorer health and require more services than the younger old. Given the preponderance of women, many of the needs of the oldest old are actually the need of women.

Be aware:

Older women are more likely than men to be widowed and to live alone.

Older women are more likely to be affected by the illness and disabilities of age.

Older women are more likely to live in poverty. They have little access to economic resources.

Older women have lower educational levels. They have less formal labour-force experience, and little visibility is given to the full extent of the work of older women, including unpaid work.

Older women have more family care-giving responsibilities than older men.

These facts suggest that immediate action needs to be taken to address the imbalance, the handicaps faced by older women. However, older women cannot be stereotyped as "one size fits all". Older women are a diverse population ... they/we do not possess one face. We are products of our lifelong experiences, and our roles vary according to the culture and the economic and technological development within the culture. Older women of today can become the "image-changers" and the role models for future generations. The girl-child of today will, within 50 short years, be the older woman of tomorrow. Today's older women want to, and can, prepare the way for that child. Older women must not be kept invisible.

We look to our Governments and national institutions to recognize our diversity, our potential, as well as our needs, and to ensure the following:

(a) Access, for women of all ages, to economic resources, including credit, land ownership and inheritance;

(b) Access to education and skill development. Lifelong learning must assure a literacy level that enables older women to work to their capacity, upgrading skills to keep current with changes in the job market;

(c) Access to appropriate, affordable, quality health care, with particular attention to older women's health concerns;

(d) Increased attention to the violence against older women in the family, the community or institutions;

(e) Increased sensitivity to the needs of older women refugees and migrants as well as recognition of their skills and survival strategies;

(f) Participation in development activities and involvement in the planning of communities and the allocation of resources;

(g) The collection of statistics related to individuals, with compilation and analysis by sex and age;

(h) Encouragement of the media to change the way in which older women are depicted ... as being vulnerable and dependent ... and instead to reflect their diversity and potential;

(i) Implementation of programmes that focus on solidarity among generations and afford opportunities for older women to improve the lives of girls and future generations of older women.

It is time to include older women's rights as one of the criteria for monitoring discrimination against women in the work of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

The following non-governmental organizations have endorsed this statement.

American Association of Retired Persons
Armenian International Women's Association
International Council of Jewish Women
International Council of Women
International Federation on Ageing
International Federation of Home Economics
International League for Human Rights
National Council on Family Relations
National Women's Conference
Soroptimist International
World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts
World Movement of Mothers
Zonta International.

Sources

United States Government, Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census;

Network News, *Newsletter of the Global Link for Middle and Older Women* (vol. I, November 1996).